

News from the Wyoming Department of Health

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Hantavirus Infection Can Be a Spring Cleaning Threat

To help prevent dangerous hantavirus infection, Wyoming Department of Health officials remind residents to consider the possible presence of rodent droppings as they clean garages, campers, cabins, hay stacks and barns this spring.

“Hantavirus is a rare, but potentially deadly disease,” said Dr. Tracy Murphy, state epidemiologist with the Wyoming Department of Health. “Anything that puts you in contact with rodent urine, droppings, saliva or nesting materials can place you at risk for infection.”

Murphy explained that infected rodents shed the virus through urine, droppings and saliva. Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS) is transmitted to humans through aerosolization, which happens when dried materials contaminated by rodent urine and feces or saliva are disturbed. Humans can become infected by breathing in these infectious aerosols. Infection is also possible when the virus is directly introduced into broken skin or mucous membranes, if it is ingested or after rodent bites.

“Since 2000, we have received reports of eight HPS cases,” said Clay Van Houten, Emerging Diseases Section chief with the Wyoming Department of Health. “Although no cases were reported in 2009, in 2008 we had two unrelated cases in Carbon County that unfortunately both resulted in death.” Even healthy individuals are at risk for HPS infection if exposed to the virus.

Van Houten said rodent infestation in and around the home and in outbuildings such as barns remains the primary risk for hantavirus exposure. In Wyoming, the deer mouse is the primary carrier of hantavirus.

The department suggests these guidelines for safe and proper cleanup of rodent-infested areas:

- During cleaning, wear rubber, latex, vinyl, or nitrile gloves.
- Spray rodent urine and droppings with a disinfectant or bleach solution until thoroughly soaked. The bleach solution can be made by combining 1 ½ cups of household bleach with 1 gallon of water.
- To avoid generating potentially infectious aerosols, do not vacuum or sweep rodent urine, droppings, nesting materials or contaminated surfaces until they have been disinfected.
- Use a paper towel (while wearing gloves) to pick up the urine and droppings. Place the paper towel in the garbage.
- After the rodent droppings and urine have been removed, disinfect items that might have been contaminated by rodents or their urine and droppings:

--- Mop floors with a disinfectant or bleach solution.

--- Disinfect countertops, cabinets, drawers and other durable surfaces with a disinfectant

or bleach solution.

--- Spray dirt floors with a disinfectant or bleach solution.

--- Disinfect carpets with a disinfectant or with a commercial-grade steam cleaner or shampoo.

--- Steam-clean or shampoo rugs and upholstered furniture.

--- Launder potentially contaminated bedding and clothing with hot water and detergent.

Use rubber, latex, vinyl or nitrile gloves when handling contaminated laundry. Machine-dry laundry on a high setting or hang it to air dry in the sun.

--- Leave books, papers and other items that cannot be cleaned with a liquid disinfectant or thrown away outdoors in the sunlight for several hours, or in an indoor area free of rodents for approximately one week before cleanup. After that time, the virus should no longer be infectious. Wear rubber, latex, vinyl or nitrile gloves and wipe the items with a cloth moistened with disinfectant.

--- Disinfect gloves before removing them with disinfectant or soap and water. After removing the gloves, thoroughly wash bare hands with soap and warm water.

In especially dirty or dusty environments, extra protective clothing or equipment should be worn such as coveralls (disposable if possible), rubber boots or disposable shoe covers, protective goggles, and masks that cover the mouth and nose. If the building has been closed and unoccupied for a long period of time, open the doors and windows for ventilation at least 30 minutes before beginning work.

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